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Original Article

Twenty Years' Evolution of North Korean Migration, 1994–2014: A Human Security Perspective

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, there have been notable changes in North Korean migration: from forced migration to trafficking in women, from heroic underground railways to people smuggling by Christian missionaries. The migration has taken mixed forms of asylum seeking, human trafficking, undocumented labour migration and people smuggling. The paper follows the footsteps of North Korean migrants from China through Southeast Asia to South Korea, and from there to the United Kingdom, to see the dynamic correlation between human (in)security and irregular migration. It analyses how individual migrant's agency interacts with other key actors in the migration system and eventually brings about emerging patterns of four distinctive forms of irregular migration in a macro level. It uses human security as its conceptual framework that is a people-centred, rather than state- or national security-centric approach to irregular migration.

Key words: North Korea, migration, human trafficking, people smuggling, human security

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, there have been notable changes in North Korean migration: from forced migration in search of freedom to economic or environmental refugees, caused by famine and natural disasters, from trafficking in women to undocumented sex work in Karaoke bars, or from heroic underground railways to people smuggling by Christian missionaries. When the author first began her research on North Korean asylum seekers in China in 1999, many North Koreans fell squarely under the category of victims of the politically repressive regime of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), its human rights violations, closed economy, the series of natural disasters, and subsequent famine and malnutrition. The motivations of their defection were mixed: political, social, economic and environmental. Fifteen years later, the author's team interviewed dozens of North Koreans who were living in the United Kingdom, as British citizens or permanent residents who are no longer categorised as victims but rather autonomous agents of their own who navigate the best places to live not just for their own survival but also for reproduction.

The article first outlines the journey of North Korean migrants from China to investigate the initial forms and motivations of North Korean irregular migration and to identify the main human security concerns in these peculiar forms of mixed migration. Second, in Southeast Asia, it focuses on the consequences and human cost of diverse geopolitical environments to which North Korean migrants are

exposed and adapt to, guided by brokers and missionaries. Affected people's (Kempadoo et al. 2005) vulnerability and potential human rights violations are the subject of inquiry. Third, in South Korea, North Koreans' legal and social identities and why their dual nationality drives secondary migration to the Western world will be analysed. Finally, the article introduces some of the challenges North Korean asylum seekers and refugees face in the United Kingdom based on a series of interviews conducted in 2012–2014.

The conceptual framework of this article is human security, a people-centred, rather than state- or national security-centric, perspective that helps us understand the non-linearity of migration patterns. Before the article moves into the empirical analysis, the human security framework will be explained below.

2. Human Security: Securitisation of Human Rights

Human security, a concept endorsed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and theorised upon by a few scholars of international relations, has slowly gained currency in public discourse but is still not widely accepted in the academic circle. Mahbub ul Haq, Pakistani economist and author of the Human Development Report, categorised the seven pillars of human security in 1994, which, I argue, are all within the realm of international human rights as follows:

- *Personal Security*: the right to life, liberty and security; not to be discriminated against on the basis of race, ethnicity, language, religion, sex, political opinion or social origin, birth, disability, gender, sexual orientation; to freedom from violence, torture, slavery, exploitation, arbitrary arrest, or summary execution; to recognition before the law, fair trial, privacy, family, property, identity/nationality, movement and residence, gender equality, freedom of thought and education (Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) Articles 1–19, 26; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Articles 2–3, 6–20, 23–4, 26; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) Articles 2–3, 10, 13–4; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC); Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT); and other International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions on forced labour or child labour)
- *Community Security*: the right to cultural life; to preserve cultural practices, values or heritage from sectarian violence or not to be discriminated against on the basis of race, ethnicity, nationality or religion (UDHR Article 27; ICCPR Article 27; ICESCR Article 15; International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD); and International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (MWC))
- *Political Security*: the rights to freedom of assembly, political participation; not to be discriminated against based on political opinion; to vote, to stand for election, to have free and fair elections, to freedom of speech, to form and maintain political organisations, or to organise social movements (UDHR Articles 2, 20–21; ICCPR Articles 21–22, 25)
- *Economic Security*: the rights to basic income, to social security, work, rest, to participate in trade unions (UDHR Article 22–4; ICESCR Articles 6–9; and other ILO conventions on minimum wage, etc.)
- *Food Security*: the rights to an adequate standard of living, to freedom from hunger, to access to basic food (ICESCR Articles 11)
- *Heath Security*: the rights to a decent standard of living, to health, to protection from infectious or chronic diseases and to access health services (UDHR Article 25; ICESCR Articles 12)
- *Environment Security*: the rights to an adequate standard of living, clothing, housing, a clean environment, especially water and air, and to be protected from man-made environmental disasters (ICESCR Articles 11)

The UN Commission on Human Security, established in 2001, has been renamed to the Human Security Unit under the Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in 2004. Its activities are meagre, not because of the lack of utility in the concept of human security but because of the institutional overlaps on its redundant mandates within the UN system. To name a few, the UNDP has broad mandates on human development, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on human rights, The UN High Commissioner for Refugees on armed conflicts/human security and refugees, the UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation on cultural security, the UN Office of Drugs and Crime on personal security and transnational crimes, the International Organisation for Migration on human security and migrants, and the International Labour Organisation on economic security and labour rights.

Since the 1994 UNDP Report, the notions of personal, cultural or environmental security have emerged and the state-centric national defence security concepts have been challenged by many scholars (Thomas 1987; Wiberg 1992; Buzan 1993; Jones 1995; Wæver 1995; Baldwin 1997; Krause & Williams 1997; Poku & Graham 1998). Many East Asian elites are receptive to the idea of human security. The Japanese government, the Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji and the ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan endorsed human security as a comprehensive security concept (on the Asian conception of human security, see Alagappa 1988; Matsumae & Chen 1995; Tow et al. 2000; Thiparat 2001; Bajpai 2003).

Human security is a more appropriate conceptual framework to understand the causes and motivations of irregular migration and also a concept that captures the urgency of extra-legal and extra-political measures through international cooperation and the paramount importance of detrimental human costs. Human security is also complex in that one set of mixed human insecurities become the cause of one irregular migrant's motivation to leave and, because of the act of leaving and the irregular status of migrants, it creates another set of human insecurities. In spite of harsh realities of human insecurities, many irregular migrants self-organise to survive. Complex networks of key actors, each with his/her own interests, facilitate irregular migration.

For this study of North Korean irregular migrants in four different locations and migratory regimes, primary sources of in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions as well as secondary data from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are used to generate and validate stories of migration. The author has interviewed North Koreans in China and South Korea since 1999. In 2012–2014, she gathered additional data from 85 new sources of North Koreans who became South Koreans and asylum seekers or refugees in the United Kingdom, focusing on new arrivals in Seoul and the United Kingdom since 2004. Among them, the main target interviewees were five former and current brokers/smugglers/guides who 'helped' migrate North Koreans from one location to another and who could reveal the detailed migratory routes and main attractors for migration.

3. 'Bare Life' in China

No official data is available on how many North Koreans live in the Republic of China (PRC). In the early 2000s, the PRC government's estimation is around 10,000–50,000; the ROK at 30,000–50,000; the US State Department at 75,000–125,000; the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at 50,000–100,000; and NGOs at 100,000–300,000 (Lee 2001–2002, 2004; Lohman 1996; Seymour 2005).

The lives of North Korean irregular migrants in China can be aptly captured by Giogio Agamben's (1998) concept of 'bare life', a life that is not 'simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but is rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable'. Judith Butler (2004) further expands and concretises Agamben's idea by proposing that we need to see 'how this power functions differently, to target and manage certain populations, to de-realize the humanity of subjects

who might potentially belong to community bound by commonly recognised laws'. Agamben (1998) defines those with 'bare life' the ones without either being granted residential status or being deported *homo sacer* (sacred man) as they 'may be killed and yet not sacrificed', which succinctly describes the lives of North Koreans in China.

North Koreans leave their homes for mixed reasons and, as a result of their irregular migration, the situation North Koreans face in China is grim. Both push and pull factors of famine and political repression in the North and food, employment, relative freedom and information in China set the exogenous environments for their irregular migration. The North Korean authority does not allow freedom of movement and sporadically restricts cross-border movements. The system itself creates migrants with irregular status. Many women, who make up 75 per cent of North Koreans who arrived in the ROK since 2006, are victims of forced marriages or sexual exploitation in China (Human Rights Watch 2002, Good Friends 2004, Anti-Slavery International 2005, Seymour 2005, Davis 2006, International Crisis Group 2006, Congressional Research Service 2007, Human Rights Watch 2008, HumanTrafficking.org 2008, Lagon 2008, Butler 2009, Committee for Human Rights in North Korea 2009, North Korea Now 2010, Park et al. 2010, United States Department of State 2010, Coalition Against Trafficking in Women 2011, Kim 2011). As soon as they leave North Korea, their illegal status in China makes them highly vulnerable to physical abuse or sexual exploitation, putting their personal security under great danger. North Koreans as a single ethnic community are targeted because of the bilateral agreement between the PRC and the DPRK that allows the Chinese authorities to repatriate North Koreans back to where they face severe persecution.

Their precarious legal status leads to another set of threats to North Koreans' political and economic securities. North Koreans cannot participate in any civic activities including the birth registration of their half-Chinese children and earn basic income to survive. Their restricted movements do not allow them access to work, basic food, health care or clean environment. They live in secret shelters and hide from the authorities. The only way they are provided with food and shelter is through local Chinese, underground Christian missionaries or aid workers whose acts are considered illegal in China. North Koreans are therefore victims of the two repressive regimes of the DPRK and the PRC.

The PRC authority presents an erratic and inconsistent policy towards North Korean migrants in China. It does not recognise North Koreans as refugees and prioritises the bilateral agreement with North Korea over its international obligation of *non-refoulement* under the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (hereafter Refugee Convention) to which it is a party. At the same time, it remains silent on the status of North Korean wives of Chinese citizens. Although some North Koreans fall squarely under the definitions of refugees or trafficking victims, described in the Refugee Convention or the 2000 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (hereafter Palermo Protocol), the work of the UNHCR in Beijing is limited. Only a handful of cases were solved through the office by quietly sending North Koreans to neighbouring countries for humanitarian reasons (Congressional Research Service 2007, p. 11). It is largely Christian missionaries who 'save' North Koreans and smuggle them to China's southern neighbouring countries.

The so-called 'Seoul Train in the Underground Railway' (see below Map 1) has been in full operation across China and Southeast Asian countries since the mid-2000s (International Crisis Group 2006, p. 14). Through various financial and physical means, North Koreans are assisted by their family members and church networks who hire local Chinese, Chinese-Korean or even North Korean brokers. They explore different migratory routes to move North Koreans to the southern borders of China. They can only do so by breaking the PRC's domestic laws (Kim 2010). The PRC authority sees these missionaries and NGOs as political or sectarian, anti-communist, anti-DPRK, and 'Christian

Map 1 Seoul Train in the Underground Railway

fundamentalist[s]' (Seymour 2005, p. 19). Churches are closely involved in smuggling North Korean asylum seekers in the name of God's humanitarianism (Committee for Human Rights in North Korea 2008).

NGO workers, Christian missionaries, local Korean-Chinese and brokers have all played significant roles in building highly resilient and secretive underground networks around North Korean asylum seekers. Their roles are almost automatically self-organised in a systematic manner. While NGOs publish advocacy reports in various languages to the international public (Good Friends, the International Crisis Group, Anti-Slavery, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the US Committee on Human Rights in North Korea all produced similar style reports), missionaries offer shelter, raise funds to pay brokers who will devise, test-try and establish escape routes. The fate of North Koreans in China is in the hands of various private actors and their interests. Brokers seek financial gain out of human trafficking and people smuggling whereas evangelicals have their mission to spread religious beliefs to North Koreans. NGOs have humanitarian principles to provide them with food and shelter. *Chosonjok*, Korean-Chinese, sharing the hard-time revolutionary history with North Koreans, have altruism towards North Koreans as well as growing material interests.

The role of 'guides' as facilitators who create networks, interactions and feedback loops increases the non-linearity of these migratory movements. Brokers transform the nature and patterns of North Korean migration from human trafficking into people smuggling and asylum seeking. Some North Koreans became brokers themselves. P was a former broker in China who used to smuggle North Koreans out of the country into the hands of their families in the South. He is also one of the first comers to the United Kingdom. He made his own way to South Korea briefly with his family and decided to re-migrate to the

United Kingdom in 2008 to settle as a North Korean refugee, hiding the fact that he had acquired South Korean citizenship already. The brokering networks are highly organised; their roles become varied and specialised like Adam Smith's pin factories. The networks of 'guides' are so multinational and well funded by Korean missionaries that one North Korean from Pyongsong, 20 km northeast of Pyongyang, spent only a few days escaping North Korea through China, Cambodia and Thailand 'without having one step in dirt, all in wheels' (Interview with C, a North Korean from Pyongsong, North Korea, August 2013, New Malden, UK).

What is clear in the North Korean migrants' journey in China is that they satisfy the refugee criteria under international law. However, protection is denied based on the Chinese priority on sovereignty, other geopolitical concerns over the potential mass exodus and bilateral relations with the DPRK. North Koreans, therefore, become subject to human trafficking and vulnerable to other abuses such as undocumented labour migrants.

4. 'Smuggled Refugees' in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asian countries offer generally transit states only for the North Koreans. None of these countries recognise and accept North Koreans as refugees. The geopolitical environments do not guarantee the protection of North Koreans. In spite of its illegality, people smuggling is the only viable option for them to survive. Approximately 75–90 per cent of North Koreans are reported to transit through Southeast Asia en route to South Korea. The government-funded Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) states that 75 per cent of North Koreans who entered South Korea in 2008 were from Southeast Asia (KINU 2009). In 2012, this figure went up to 90 per cent. However, no exact numbers were released. The situation is more complex than that in China, with added state authorities with respective interests and identities that are not always predictable. Missionaries, NGO workers and brokers still play important roles. For North Koreans, the transformation from North Korean citizens to irregular migrants and to asylum seekers for the enemy state, South Korea, is an adaptive learning process.

Table 1 Diplomatic Relations between the two Koreas and Southeast Asia

Country	*DPRK*	*ROK*
Brunei	07/01/1999	01/01/1984
Cambodia	28/02/1964	30/10/1997
Indonesia	16/04/1964	18/09/1973
Laos	24/06/1974	25/10/1995
Malaysia	02/07/1973	26/02/1960
Burma/Myanmar	16/05/1975	16/05/1975
Philippines	12/07/2000	03/03/1949
Singapore	08/11/1975	07/08/1975
Thailand	08/05/1975	01/10/1958
Vietnam	30/01/1950	22/12/1992

Note: The red shading means countries having longer diplomatic relations with the DPRK; the blue shading means countries having longer diplomatic relations with the ROK.

Each country of illegal entry in Southeast Asia has a distinctive 'dependence path' of Cold War history, diplomatic relations and material interests with each Korea since the end of the Second World War (see Table 1 below for formal diplomatic relations). Various post-Cold War factors and current defence ties affect the transit country's decision to recognise North Korean irregular migrants. Trade, investment and developmental aid are becoming more and more important factor for this decision (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) 2005). Humanitarian principles, the media and international criticism appeal to the conscience of political elite and civil society that shape the country's political and normative identities. Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were the DPRK's allies during the Cold War. Over the past decade, however, the ROK has invested in development projects in the region and many South Koreans opened their businesses and factories there.

Given this unpredictable environment, missionaries and brokers navigate safer countries to transit. The following paragraphs are the author's annotated interviews with locally based missionaries and brokers.[1] Cambodia is

1. Interviews were conducted in May–June 2013 in Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai in Thailand during the author's own fieldwork research and through telephone

one of the two countries in Southeast Asia that are party to the Refugee Convention. However, it does not accept North Koreans as refugees. Cambodia is used only after transiting Laos as it is not geographically adjacent to China. Burma/Myanmar, although bordering with China, is also geographically challenging because of the rough mountain landscape along the borders. It is also not safe because there are civil conflicts at the margins of Burma/Myanmar and the military government's ceasefire agreements with local rebel groups are still being negotiated. According to an NGO report in 2006, the Burmese authorities, however, did not prevent North Koreans from entering the ROK Embassy in Yangon (International Crisis Group 2006, p. 23).

In July 2004, Vietnam, one of the Cold-War allies of North Korea, decided to send 468 North Korean asylum seekers via a chartered Korean airline to South Korea. On this decision, the Vietnamese government publicly stated that it would comply with 'Vietnamese laws, international law and practices in humanitarian spirit' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam 2004). This episode created diplomatic tensions with the DPRK, which recalled its ambassador to Pyongyang. The Vietnam route has not been much used since this incident, at least publicly.

Laos, being the most commonly used route before Thailand, charges 'fines' or 'diplomatic fees' for releasing North Korean border-crossers (International Crisis Group 2006, p. 21). A number of sources identified that China-Laos-Thailand route has been the most popular one among brokers (an interview with P in London in July 2013 confirmed this route). According to Chu Song Ha, a former North Korean and now South Korean journalist of *DongA Daily*, around 800 North Koreans reportedly transited through Laos to South Korea in 2009. Chu, however, did not identify where the number was from. In many news reports concerning North Korean defectors, the sources are unidentified and therefore unverifiable and unreliable. In 2009, the total number of North Koreans who arrived in South Korea was 2,929 (Ministry of Unification 2015). As the number went up, the Laotian authority raised the fees from US$200 to US$400 per head if a North Korean wishes to seek refuge in Laos (interview with two missionaries, C and K, based in Laos in July 2013 via telephone). If a migrant only wants to transit through Laos to other countries, the fees are only US$50. Thailand is often used as North Koreans' last transit point before South Korea as it does not deport North Koreans to North Korea for humanitarian reasons. The Thai authority imposes a fine of THB 2,000–6,000 (approximately US$187) or 10–30 days imprisonment in a local prison for illegal entry. These figures are suggested by a Bangkok-based South Korean missionary who has been helping North Koreans smuggled in from China. In contrast, at the Chiang Rai immigration court, cited in the 2006 report of the International Crisis Group, declared the penalty for illegal entry to be US$53 or 5 days in jail (2006, p. 22).

The roles of international law and international organisations have been questioned (Chan & Schloenhardt 2007) and they are of little help in smuggling cases. Laos and Thailand are not parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and therefore are under no obligations to offer asylum for North Koreans. PRC and Cambodia are parties but they do not fully comply with international humanitarian or human rights principles. The UNHCR itself defines North Korean asylum seekers in China and Thailand as 'persons of concern', not refugees (UNHCR 2015). In 2006, the then High Commissioner António Guterres, on his visit to Thailand, even understated that the situation was not 'dramatic, compared to other parts of the world' at a press conference in Bangkok (Kyodo News 2006). The International Crisis Group (2006, p. 21), on the other hand, identifies North Koreans in Thailand as 'smuggled migrants'.

The illegality of their movements deters many from human rights approaches to North

and emails. Other journalistic and NGO reports are also consolidated for further information. As stated in the introduction, personal accounts from missionaries, brokers and North Koreans are often not reliable, which is the biggest obstacle for this research. To overcome this difficulty, the author uses multiple sources of information from different locations.

Korean migrants. I would like to highlight that the forms of North Korean irregular migration is highly mixed: there are trafficked refugees or trafficked undocumented labourers in China and smuggled refugees in Thailand or Laos. The term, 'smuggled refugees', indicates that they are not refugees defined by international law but become refugees when they are successfully smuggled (Song 2013). When they reach Bangkok through smuggling, they can finally seek protection and refuge by the ROK government or a third country. One needs to note that North Koreans are not refugees under the ROK laws. ROK does not recognise the DPRK as a separate state (and vice versa) although they have been separate UN member states since 1991. The ROK also claims the entire Korean peninsula as its sovereign territory. According to this constitutional interpretation, therefore, North Koreans are also South Koreans whom the ROK government should protect. North Korea, of course, denies this argument and insists that those North Koreans are illegal border-crossers and subsequently kidnapped by South Korean missionaries and some covert intelligence officers sent from Seoul, and therefore should be returned to the country of origin.

North Koreans flee from basic personal, political, economic, food, health and environment insecurities back home. They are not protected by China as China is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. They are buck-passed by Laos, tolerated by Thailand, and left in the hands of brokers and Christian missionaries until the former reach the ROK embassies in Southeast Asia. These private actors who see themselves as heroes are in fact outlaws or human traffickers from the transit countries' or the DPRK's point of view. One former North Korean broker notes that 'I consider myself a hero who has saved many lives. I cannot be a good citizen and abide by laws when these laws are made by bad guys'. Although the major roles in smuggling are played by brokers, North Koreans themselves develop personal agency along their perilous journeys through China and Southeast Asia through interactions with other private actors and adapting their endogenous survival skills to new environments.

5. Fungible Identities: North or South Korean?

Myron Weiner (1994, p. 11) identifies the threats refugees may pose to a hosting society: (i) in worsening relations between sending and receiving countries; (ii) as a political threat or security risk to the regime of the host country; (iii) as a cultural threat; (iv) causing socio-economic problems; and (v) when the host society uses refugees as an instrument of threat against the country of origin. All of these matter to South Korea from a state-centric view. There is a loophole in the system where North Korean secret agents can infiltrate through 'smuggled refugee' routes from Southeast Asia and it is an existential threat to national security. The mass acceptance of North Koreans has been a politically driven policy that was designed to undermine and challenge the North Korean regime and to grow anti-DPRK factions in South Korea. It is also a hugely expensive policy for both North Koreans and South Korean taxpayers as the former have to pay brokers the 'defection fees' and the latter's tax goes to the settlement programmes for North Koreans. The cost for one North Korean defector to arrive in South Korea, gathered from the online newspapers and personal interviews, is between KRW 2.5 million to 10 million (approximately US$2,000–8,000). If 25,000 North Koreans (as of December 2013, 26,124 North Korean residents in South Korea) needed on average US$3,500, for example, this amounts to US$87.5 million. Receiving a large number of refugees comes with costs, not just financially but politically as well.

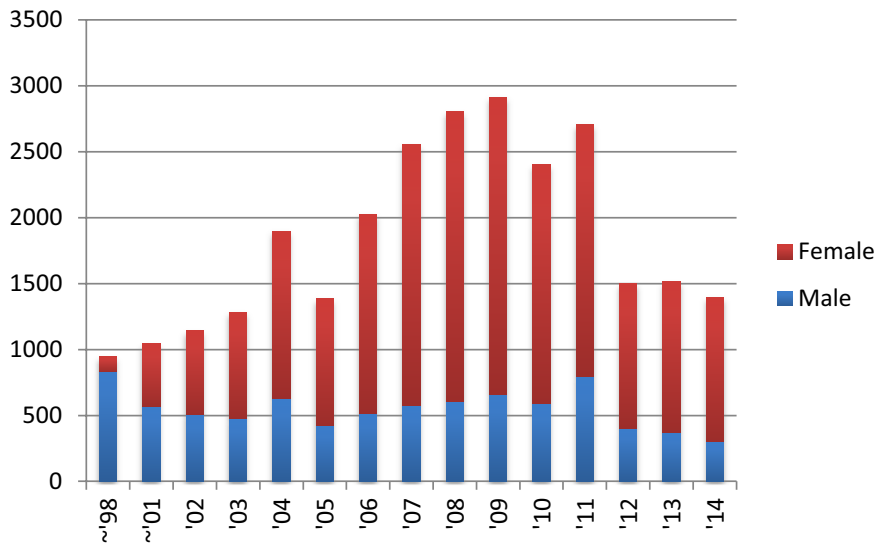
In 2006–2011, the number of North Koreans entering South Korea has been more than 2,000 annually. The total number of North Koreans living in South Korea is 25,329 as of 2012 (see Figure 1) (Ministry of Unification). This figure is marginal, given South Korea's 50 million population or even North Korea's 25 million (World Bank 2014). Despite the small number, national security concerns grew among South Koreans as there were several 'spy' cases. According to South Korea's conservative right-wing newspaper, *Choson Ilbo*

(2010), two North Korean spies infiltrated South Korea through Thailand in 2010. They attempted to assassinate Hwang Jang Yup, the highest ranking North Korean defector who fled to the ROK through the Philippines in 1997. Another well-publicised case is the convicted female spy, Won Chong Hwa, who was believed to have orders from the North to seduce military officers who then could leak information about the South's military defence systems (Shin Dong A 2014).

However, this national security perspective misrepresents the general North Korean community in South Korea. The forementioned few spy cases are exceptional and most North Korean residents are ordinary working class people. They acquire South Korean citizenship after the screening investigation by the ROK National Intelligence Service and the resettlement programme by the Ministry of Unification for 3 months. North Koreans become South Koreans but cannot fully integrate into the society. Many North Koreans, including those I interviewed in London and Seoul, say they went through identify confusion, if not crisis, while trying to adapt to the new environment in South Korea (Yoon & Lim 2007). Many expressed that they had faced numerous difficulties in adjusting to the highly competitive capitalist society. Their settlement benefits are enough to get by but not enough to enter the mainstream South Korean society. Their foreign language and computer skills are far below that of average South Koreans. Many experience discrimination against their origin in schools and workplaces. The sensational spy cases can result in arbitrary search and arrest of any suspected North Koreans. Some North Koreans in South Korea do not have access to basic income because of inadequate support for North Koreans who lack basic vocational skills. Those who receive subsistence benefits is still high at 35 per cent in 2013, but down from 63.5 per cent in 2007 (Ministry of Unification 2015). They also suffer from post-traumatic symptoms affected by their perilous journeys in China and Southeast Asia (Jeon et al. 2013). In August 2013, surprising statistics were released from the Ministry of Unification. Among approxi-

Figure 1 Annual Arrivals of North Koreans in South Korea

	~'98	~'01	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14
Male	831	565	510	474	626	424	515	573	608	662	591	795	404	369	304
Female	116	478	632	811	1,272	960	1,513	1,981	2,195	2,252	1,811	1,911	1,098	1,145	1,092
Total	947	1,043	1,142	1,285	1,898	1,384	2,028	2,554	2,803	2,914	2,402	2,706	1,502	1,514	1,396



mately 25,000 North Korean residents in South Korea, there are 26 suicides, 583 deaths, 51 emigrants and 796 missing (Yonhap News 2013b). South Korea is known as the highest suicide rate among all member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development at 31.2 in every 100,000 in 2012. Among North Koreans, it is 124, four times higher than South Koreans.

The politics of jealousy and competition for resources begin as the number of North Koreans grows in South Korea. Settlement fees, free public housing, and incentives for education and employment provided for North Koreans have created tensions between North Koreans and other working-class South Koreans or low-income *chosonjok* labour migrants. Negative images of North Korean feature in the main news media about their alleged violent behaviour, fraud, laziness, high dependency and gender bias (Yonhap News 2013a). At the same time, many North Koreans become disillusioned about South Korea. Many I interviewed in 2012–2014 expressed that all they wanted was 'not to be identified a person from North Korea'.

North Koreans in South Korea are not refugees due to the special inter-Korean relations. The Korean War did not end with a peace treaty but with an armistice. Technically, the two Koreas are still at war; neither side has won the war yet. The official title given to North Koreans in South Korea has been changed over the past decades. Until late 1980s, they were named 'returnees to submit' (*kuisuncha*). Later, they were called 'North Korean defectors' (*talbukcha*), 'North Korean defectors-residents' (*bukhan yital chumin*) or 'new settlers' (*setomin*): North Korean residents in South Korea call South Koreans '*bontomin*', which means original settlers. North Koreans become South Koreans with North Korea as their origin of birth, having distinctive identity from other South Koreans, which creates inclusion and exclusion as well as new motivations to re-migrate to another country.

Although most human security conditions have significantly improved for North Koreans who acquired South Korean citizenship, they suffer from greater economic insecurity and feel discriminated against by their fellow South Koreans. With the absence of a peace treaty after the 1953 Korean War, both South and North Koreans are insecure about their personal and political securities. This has been invisible hindrance to peace and security in the Korean peninsula whether Koreans feel it or not.

6. Re-Migration to the West

When the numbers of North Korean asylum seekers in the United Kingdom in 2006–2008 were released, many North Korea watchers, including myself, were deeply puzzled. It amounted to 602 asylum applications in 2007. Considering that the direct routes from North Korea to the United Kingdom were neither easily accessible nor comprehensible, the author's immediate suspicion was either that they were not North Koreans or that they came from South Korea. It did not take long to find out that many of those North Korean refugees had not come directly from North Korea but transited through various countries in East Asia, including China, Thailand, Laos and South Korea through interviews with members of the Korean community in the United Kingdom, mainly in New Malden, the biggest Korean community in Europe. For many South Koreans and especially the government of the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea), it was embarrassing to learn that the majority of the North Koreans, who claimed their refugee status in the United Kingdom, had already settled and resided in South Korea. More alarmingly, perhaps for the UK authorities, a half of the granted North Korean refugees were reported to be *chosonjok* (Korean-Chinese), not North Korean (Radio Free Asia 2012). The Institute for Peace and Unification Studies reported that 258 out of 415 North Korean asylum applicants in the United Kingdom in 2007 were suspected to be Chinese nationals (Song 2012).

Over the past decade, the United Kingdom and Canada have been the two most popular destination countries for North Koreans. Table 2 shows that there was a stark increase in

Table 2 North Korean Asylum Applications and Refugee Status Determination in the UK

Year	*RSD procedure level description*	*Total persons pending at start of year*	*Persons assisted by UNHCR at start of year*	*Persons applied during year*	*Positive decisions (convention status)*	*Positive decisions (Complementary protection status)*	*Rejected*	*Otherwise closed*	*Total decisions*	*Total persons pending at end of year*
2012	Administrative review	44			7				7	23
2012	First instance	15		30	9		15		24	17
2011	Administrative review			20	10		9	4	23	
2011	First instance			28	8 (12.5%)	4	44 (68.8%)	8	64	
2010	First instance			54	1 (0.6%)	6	141 (80.1%)	28	176	
2010	Repeat/reopened application			4			2		2	
2009	First instance			56	3 (2.8%)	1	60 (56.6%)	42	106	
2008	First instance			273	279 (64.3%)	10	77 (17.7%)	68	434	
2007	First instance			602	204 (79.4%)	19	19 (7.4%)	15	257	
2006	First instance			61	20 (46.5%)	11	8 (18.6%)	4	43	
2005	First instance			42	4	12	12	5	33	
2004	First instance			27	6	11	36	13	66	
2003	First instance			15				1	1	
Total				1212	551	74	423	188	1236	

Source: UNHCR, Statistical Online Population Database at http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4a013eb06.html, modified by the author.

the number of North Korean applicants who sought refuge in the United Kingdom from 61 in 2006 to 602 in 2007. The number dropped to 56 in 2009. At the same time, the rejection rate increased from the lowest 7.4 per cent in 2007 to 80.1 per cent in 2010.

When granted the refugee status, North Koreans were allocated council housing in major cities of the United Kingdom. However, many of them relocated to New Malden, the biggest Korea Town in Europe where they could work and use social networks of other Koreans, both from North and South Korea. They formed the UK North Korean Residents Society in New Malden in May 2008 and have actively involved various political events regarding North Korea. Most North Koreans who came to the United Kingdom had already settled in South Korea and become South Korean citizens who could then travel to the United Kingdom, visa-free for 6 months. Guided by the information circulated within families and social networks, they sought refuge and subsequently were granted refugee status. Some have already acquired permanent resident status in the United Kingdom.[2]

This phenomenon is not unique to North Korean asylum seeking. Similar patterns of behaviour have been labelled as 'bogus' refugees in the migration literature (Neumayer 2005; Diez 2011; Zimmermann 2011; Stefanova 2014; Stewart & Mulvey 2014). The main reasons for their secondary migration identified during my interviews were social discrimination in South Korea (push factor) and children's education in more developed English-speaking Western countries with generous welfare packages (pull factors). A female North Korean in her 40s says: 'it's ok to be discriminated against here because there are many second-class or third-class citizens like those black people. But, in South Korea, I couldn't bear the second-class citizen treatments from fellow Koreans. It's so humiliating'. What is more important than the linear push-pull factors is the facilitating factor by social networks, formed in the rehabilitation centre, called *Hanawon* under the ROK Ministry of Unification. During the 3-month residential programme, North Koreans share information about living in South Korea and possible secondary migration destinations. They compare benefits systems and recent success rates. Many parents choose English-speaking countries for their children's education. The United Kingdom meets all of these conditions.

There is a danger that the topic of North Korean refugees may be focused on the illegality of their movements (Radio Free Asia 2014). The causes and motivations of their 20 years of irregular migration should receive adequate attention from a human security perspective. North Koreans left their homes due to personal, political, economic, food, health and environmental insecurities since the beginning of multiple natural disasters, followed by famine and malnutrition in the 1990s. Many in China were trafficked. Some were 'saved' by missionaries. Others smuggled. As of 2012, 25,329 North Koreans live in South Korea (Ministry of Unification 2013). Many feel the harsh reality of difficult social integration and discrimination based on their place of birth, especially for the second generation of North Koreans who were born and raised in South Korea. The perception about North Koreans in South Korea is double edged. On the one hand, they are seen as helpless victims of the repressive regime under the Kim family and therefore in need of help and assistance, which is often unilaterally evaluated and implemented. On the other, the settlement benefits and affirmative actions under the Law on the Protection and Settlement for North Korean Defectors is often seen as excessive by ordinary working-class South Koreans.[3]

2. In July–August 2012 and again in July–August 2013, the author visited New Malden and Kingston upon Thames where North Korean residents have formed a community and interviewed North Koreans, both asylum seekers and residents.

3. In a series of fieldwork interviews with South Korean researchers working on North Korea at Dongkuk University, Seoul National University and the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) in May 2014, a number of them raised concerns about the growing social conflicts between North Korean residents and lower-middle class South Koreans. There are many 'North Koreans only' social or educational services that South Koreans cannot enjoy. For example, Y, a PhD student from a middle-

North Koreans have figured out a loophole in the UK refugee system which has allowed many Korean-Chinese and, to a larger extent, North Korean residents in South Korea to receive refugee status with faked identities.[4] There is a long waiting time before a decision is made whether or not to accept a refugee. Young South Korean passport holders with North Korean parents go to visa-free countries for South Koreans, and claim refuge. While the final decisions are being processed, they are offered housing and language services. Some take this as an English language training experience. Even though the refugee applications are rejected, they gain free English language education offered by refugee services.[5] There is no system in place to check the applicants' age if they do not present any verifiable IDs. Those who claim to be underaged or elderly may receive additional protection and benefits from host governments. Of course, this does not represent the North Korean communities in the United Kingdom or Canada. However, a significant portion of the communities show this trend and behaviour based on the author's own interviews and other ongoing research projects on the topic.[6]

There are also the inherent structural Cold War problems still lingering in the Korean peninsula. The 1950–1953 Korean War did not end. It paused with an armistice and, therefore, two Koreas are still at war and Koreans, both in North and South, have live in prolonged armed conflict for more than 60 years. This is a fundamental threat to human security for everyone living in the Korean peninsula. While it may be a legal issue to determine a person's refugee status, the dual nationality argument is at odds with the temporary nature of the truce that was signed by both Koreas and the UN, headed by the United States. North Koreans who fled North Korea to live in South Korea realise the only way to be safer and secure from these prolonged armed conflicts is to flee to another country.

North Korean secondary migrants to the United Kingdom have diverse backgrounds, motivations, migratory experiences or local adaptation, having to go through in China, Southeast Asian countries and South Korea. There is a varying degree in each migrant's exposure to personal, community, political, economic, food, health and environmental insecurities. The refugee decision should be based on the person's individual life events and accessible resources, not a person's nationality or the immediate sending country's protection standards. For example, a North Korean woman in her 50s lodged a refugee claim to join her elder brother and his family who had successfully settled in the United Kingdom as refugees (Interview with P in London in July 2013). She had no means of survival in South Korea; no skills that are required in modern high-tech South Korea and no friends or families to rely on. Her brother hired a broker to escape her from North Korea, through China, Laos and Cambodia, to South Korea. She stayed in South Korea only for a few months only to re-migrate to join her brother in the United

income family saw an advertisement about free English language lessons in the campus. She called the organiser and heard that the programme was open for North Koreans only and she was not qualified. The North Koreans, however, according to her, all received government scholarships and had their college education almost for free. Some North Koreans 'disappear' to the United Kingdom or Canada and come back with good English, she said.

4. The author's own confidential interviews in London in 2012–2014 verify that there are at least dozens of Korean-Chinese who were granted refugee status from the UK government.

5. Interview with C, a North Korean resident in her early 20s who went to Canada to claim refuge for this reason in November 2012. Her application was rejected and she returned to South Korea in April 2013. According to her, there were five to six others who were all North Korean youth with South Korean passports in the same shelter she stayed, operated by first-comer North Koreans.

6. The KINU has been sending their teams to investigate the issue since 2010. The Institute for Peace and Unification Studies of Seoul National University published a report in 2012 on North Korean diaspora. A team from Yonsei University has written an internal confidential report on North Korean refugee claims in major Western countries for the Ministry of Unification in 2012 or 2013, which is not available to public view as of June 2014. An ambitious anthropological PhD research that includes live-in experience with North Korean refugees in New Malden by Chung Soo Min from the University of Oxford has been ongoing since 2010.

Kingdom. Her application was rejected in April 2013 and she faced removal.

7. Conclusion

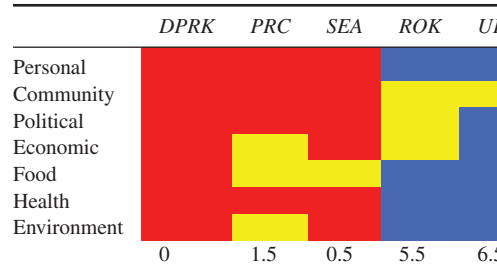
This study adds a human security perspective to the existing literature on North Korean migration in particular and irregular migration in general. What can be inferred from the current case study is that irregular migration, i.e. trafficking in persons, undocumented labour migration, asylum seeking and people smuggling, takes a mixed form and it is best understood by looking at both the migrants' exogenous human security conditions and inner motivations. What has turned out to be most important is their interactions with other key agents in the system such as missionaries and brokers. In China, many women were initially trafficked. Some become undocumented labour migrants while others move on to neighbouring countries by paying brokers. In Southeast Asia, if their assisted smuggling is successful, they become refugees. In South Korea, North Koreans are officially accepted as South Koreans.

Another aspect that can be drawn from this study is that the nature of irregular migrants evolves over time through their journeys. In case of North Korean migrants, they develop from helpless victims to independent agents through their accumulated experiences and interactions with other actors under the changing geo-political structure and regional environments over the past two decades. In the first instance, North Koreans are victims of repressive undemocratic regimes that do not respect the right to freedom of movement or to seek refuge under international law. They learn to make full use of all the available resources they have in China and Southeast Asia from missionaries. To varying degrees, each individual North Korean operates with basic survival instinct to protect his or her human security and enhances this through learning, sharing and adaptation. North Koreans keep moving across fragile borders with fungible identities. They can act the part of refugee in freer and more secure countries like the United Kingdom or Canada. This self-organising behaviour is not planned in advance but constituted through interactions with others during their long migratory journeys. Such migratory patterns are non-linear and unpredictable as we do not know when, where and how feedback loops and networks are created to lead to a next migration destination.

What we learn from this dynamic migration process is that the role of non-state actors is among the most critical factor while state actors are merely responsive or retroactive. NGOs and Christian missionaries' involvement in smuggling, such as paying for brokers and bribing security officers, raises some serious moral questions. They strengthen illegal smuggling networks across China and Southeast Asia while leaving the majority of North Koreans who cannot hire brokers in a more vulnerable condition. They undermine global anti-corruption movements for the sake of saving North Koreans (or achieving their religious mission), underestimate complex geopolitical contexts in the region, and ironically contribute to sustaining the North Korean economy by remittance.

The main argument for this article is that the main driver of irregular migration is the quest to improve human security (see Table 3). This hypothesis can be applied to other irregular migration cases. North Koreans move from less secure and less democratic countries (the DPRK and the PRC) to more secure ones (the ROK or the United Kingdom). South Korea protects basic human security in terms of food, health and environment. However, it still has many challenging issues such as discriminatory policies and practices regarding basic income

Table 3 Human Security and North Korean Migration



The blue shading means secure (1); the yellow shading means medium (0.5); the red shadings means insecure (0).

and socio-political freedom based on national origin or birth. The ROK policy of inducing North Koreans (to flee to South Korea) and its unrealistic territorial definition in the state's constitution result from the prolonged armed conflict on the Korean peninsula. The United Kingdom is a democratic welfare state that better protects personal and economic securities. Not everyone survives in these complex evolutionary processes. Only those with strong self-organising and adaptive skills do. Many must have vanished along the way. As of August 2013, around 26,000 North Koreans live in South Korea and at least 796 are missing and believed to be overseas claiming refuge. To call this natural selection might sound politically irresponsible; however, for the survival and reproduction of North Koreans, their continuous search for new migration destinations is a natural phenomenon. Survival and adaptation are basic instincts of the North Korean migrants that are not much different from those observed in the natural world. What policy makers and migration experts should be reminded of is that humans are purposeful beings with consciences, and that irregular migration, regardless of its illegality, must be approached from a human security perspective, not a state-centric one.

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